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Parents deserve a choice

Sam Johnson

Children may represent a fraction of today's society, but they make up 100 percent of our future. That is why we must do all we can to ensure that no child is left behind. That includes guaranteeing that students receive the best education possible.

Within a month, the U.S. Supreme Court will have an opportunity to rule in favor of America's children who want to learn. Let us hope the court will do just that.

Parents of all walks of life recognize that a good education is one of the key building blocks for their children to have a better life.

This desire of parents to see their children succeed has been the driving force behind the growing discontent with our nation's schools. Elected officials at all levels of government have been rushing to respond to these concerns.

States have long been called "laboratories of democracy." As a former state legislator, I always have believed that, while the federal government can play an important role in shaping America's educational system, it is essential that states and local communities take the lead in fixing our public schools.

During the 1990s, the Cleveland Municipal School District was the lowest-performing district in the state of Ohio. During the same time, Cleveland's graduation rate was only 28 percent, making it one of the worst in the nation. It was so bad that a federal court took the drastic step of stripping control of the school system from the local level and moved it to the state capital.

In one effort to help children trapped in Cleveland's failing schools, state legislators created a voucher program designed to give low-income families greater flexibility in choosing a school for their child.

The program currently in effect in Cleveland represents the best of that ideal, placing the decision for a

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child's education at the most important level possible — with a parent.

Unfortunately, opponents of giving parents control of their child's education — namely the education establishment elite and the teacher unions — have attacked the program, saying it violates the First Amendment because a majority of parents have chosen to send their children to religious schools.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The Cleveland program is not about promoting religion; it is about promoting students.

The only way these educational dollars go to a private or religious school is if the parents make that choice. Parents make a choice as to what is best for their child, and then direct the educational dollars accordingly.

In fact, the Cleveland program is neutral on religion. It does not promote children going to religious schools over private schools. It just so happens that a majority of the schools in the Cleveland area accepting the vouchers are religious.

The significant fact is the overwhelming demand by parents for the Cleveland program. Since its creation in 1996, there consistently have been many more applicants than slots available in the program. During the 2000-01 school year, nearly 4,200 Cleveland students were pulled out of its failing school system and placed in one of the participating schools.

Without the voucher, nearly all these students would have been trapped in a failing school.

Cleveland's voucher program was part of an effort to rescue a failing school system and to create options and opportunities for economically disadvantaged children to receive a first-rate education.

The fact that more religious schools helped save children from failing schools is no basis to hold the program unconstitutional.

Let Cleveland's record of success speak for itself. After two years, students in Cleveland's private schools scored 7 percentage points higher than the national average in reading and 15 points higher in math. These are important improvements that must be considered.

America's parents, and more importantly, America's children, deserve to have a choice about their education. As parents, we all want to feel that we have the ability to help create a better life for our own children. Empowering parents with this type of authority about education is the first step to ensuring that our children have the same shot at success.

So as the Supreme Court and America look objectively at this case, the court must keep a few things

in mind. This case is not about religion. This case is about children. This case is about education. This case is about America's future.

• *Sam Johnson is a Republican member of the U.S. House of Representatives from Texas and serves on the House Committee on Education and the Work Force.*

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